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Pragmatics and Politics: the case of industrial assurance in the UK

Liz Mcfall

Using the case of industrial assurance, this paper argues that a focused concern with the **pragmatics** of market devices can offer a particularist **politics** of analysis by uncovering the material, technical and social conditions through which economic objects and persons are constituted. Industrial assurance grew exponentially in the UK after 1880 to become, through a series of political and economic twists and turns, by the 1910s the key commercial institution offering to ‘foster and protect’ the savings of the poor. Deploying a business model - based on door-to-door agents’ collection of small weekly premiums - unchanged in its key particulars for more than a century, industrial assurance was extraordinarily successful. The paper argues that pragmatic description of industrial assurance as an *agencement* reveals how entangled emerging industrial assurance markets were with political theorising, government and law **Keywords: industrial life assurance, agencement, pragmatics, performativity, politics, markets, legislation**

Full fathom five thy father lies
Of his bones are coral made
Those are pearls that were his eyes
Nothing of him that does fade
But doth suffer a sea change
Into something rich and strange
Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

The radical departure pragmatism is proposing is that ‘political’ is not an adjective that defines a profession, a sphere, an activity, a calling, a site, or a procedure, but it is what qualifies a type of situation. Pragmatism proposes that we focus on the objects of concern and then, so as to handle them, produce the instruments and equipment necessary to grasp the questions they have raised and in which we are hopelessly entangled. (Latour, 2007: 103)

1. Introduction

This paper draws upon the history of life assurance¹ in Britain across two centuries to argue against the critical current which sees in the economic performativity literature an apolitical banality.² What is seen by some as banal description at the expense of analytical engagement, contrarily, may offer the best chance of properly understanding the moves and shifts that collide over time to produce market objects. Banal description offers a chance to capture the rich and strange, the unpredictable, unlikely and in historical terms, often forgotten, processes, practices and devices that constitute or perform markets. Further, I want to argue

that while description conducted along these lines, may sometimes be apolitical, anti-political or anti-critical, it is not *necessarily* so, even if it involves an approach to politics and critique that is likely to remain unsatisfactory to some. This approach is one that refuses to take analytical categories as a starting point often allowing instead questions about *how* market objects are produced to take precedence over *why*. Such a refusal is not anti-critical just for the sake of it. Rather it is informed by a pragmatic commitment to describing the history and distribution, the technical and limited settings of economic personae and objects to better understand their means and their ends *in their own terms*. Through banal description the sorts of normative generalisations which abound in critique about the relationship between markets and ideals of, say: community, personal autonomy, economic justice, sustainability or egalitarianism; can be tempered, not only with a better understanding of particular markets, their political histories and their morals, but with a firmer grasp of the serious difficulty of reprogramming or rearranging worlds according to what appear more enlightened criteria (cf du Gay, 2008, Maurer, 2008; Menand, 2002, Newton, 2002,). Commitment to abstract ideals is easy for academics, defining, organising and planning and how they might be achieved is a different matter.

In keeping with this approach, my aim is to defend descriptive, pragmatic research programmes and their political engagement through a discussion of how entangled the industrial assurance markets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were with political theorising, government and law. Pragmatist thought locates the political in certain types of situation rather than in particular spheres, locations or forms of activity.³ It carries the advantage of being alive to the plural, material and social character of political ideas and at least the potential to understand the collisions between market, governmental, legal and other institutions as politics in the making. A focus on pragmatics, and on performativity, might

thus explain rather than neglect (cf Fligstein and Dauter, 2007) the effects of law and government on market processes.

Life insurance is a useful exemplar in this context because, through its generality of principle and technique, it has attained a particular historical standing in both abstract, political modelling and as part of concrete legal and governmental strategies. The particular case considered here, industrial life assurance, targeted as it was at poorer, 'industrial' classes⁴, was closely entwined with the modelling of what constituted the proper objects of government. Industrial assurance, for successive governments, was a limit case that tested professed doctrines of non-interference in commercial activity and helped prompt an enlargement of the field of government.

The paper sets out the case in two main steps. The first section places industrial life assurance in its political and governmental context. Insurance has, for good reason, been taken up within the governmentality literature as a vital technique within the emergence of distinct political rationalities. It has assumed centre-stage in debates about 'marketisation' and the late twentieth century shift away from 'socialized' towards 'privatised' or 'prudentialist' actuarial government. But looking closely at the historical, legislative context of industrial assurance and its predecessors suggests that the theoretical modelling of socialized versus prudentialist actuarialism is sometimes a little overdrawn. On the ground, insurance projects triggered what Latour (2004) and Callon (2007a) have called 'matters of concern' which neither they, nor successive governments and legislators, were able to clearly, fully or satisfactorily resolve. Certainly, whatever its original aims might have been, UK insurance legislation, often bore the hallmarks not so much of a coherent theoretical model, but of a series of working compromises that grew out of the interaction of a range of political and quasi-political, market, quasi-market and non-market participants.

Industrial assurance survived and flourished for over a century despite persistent and widespread controversy over its costs, design and methods. The second section suggests that the best clue to understanding *how* that happened can be gained from exploring the pragmatics of the market device or *agencement* (Callon, 2005; Muniesa et al. 2007) on which it was based. Thinking about industrial assurance as an *agencement*, a sort of enrolling market device comprised of technical, material and social elements which find their form in an external context they *define* as much as they *draw from* explains why it succeeded, but, as I aim through a focus on the agency system, to show, it also demonstrates *how* markets and politics are co-constructed over long historical periods.

None of this is to deny that pragmatic research programmes raise difficult questions about politics and political engagement. Pragmatic research often invokes a particularist politics that sits uneasily with more general concerns about poverty, inequality, injustice and so forth. It is the difficulty of moving between particularist accounts of markets and more generalist analyses of market structures and consequences that has motivated many critics. The final section returns briefly to these issues to conclude that it is nevertheless within this particularism and within this pragmatism that the scope for informed and meaningful politics resides.

2. Life insurance and the politics of markets

In their genealogical accounts of the emergence of the welfare state, theorists like Donzelot (1988) and Ewald (1986, 1991) characterise insurance techniques as central to the historical ‘socialisation’ of security through the solidarity project. As Ewald (1986) was well aware however, insurance techniques vary enormously in both their character and in their fit with political programmes. Ascending political rationalities, O’Malley maintains (1996: 196-7), shape insurance techniques so, with the spread of neo-liberalism in the 1980s, socialised

insurances began to give way to a 'reactivated' privatised or prudential actuarialism with roots in Victorian liberalism. In casting the responsibility for managing risk away from social insurance and back upon the individual this reborn prudentialism echoes the Victorian doctrine of 'self-help' championed by Samuel Smiles (1866). The link is hard to miss in the language of the 1979 Conservative Party Manifesto spotted by Grey (1992).

We want to work with the grain of human nature, helping people to help themselves – and others. This is the way to restore that self-reliance and self-confidence which are the basis of personal responsibility and national success. (in Grey, 1992: 10)

O'Malley acknowledges that the return to prudentialism was only ever partial, and his account resists the temptation to characterise insurance, as authors like Ewald and Donzelot arguably did at times, as offering an inevitable fit with any political programme. For Ewald in particular, there is a tension in his depiction of insurance as at once a malleable governmental technology and yet one with a sort of sovereign historical association with the political rationality of socialized actuarialism. As Liukko (2008) points out, Ewald offers a detailed historical analysis of the entanglement of liberal and social rationalities with different forms of insurance, but still presents the birth of statutory social insurance in France at the end of the nineteenth century as an historical border line between a paradigm of liberal responsibility and one of social solidarity.

This raises questions about how the relationship between political thought, government programmes and insurance is best understood⁵. Even at their most politically programmatic, government strategies are opportunistic and draw upon a range of sources and further, in the present case, the liberal leaning British governments of the period, had, at best, a loosely articulated relationship with the institutions managing the insurance technologies they sought to utilise. As persuasive an account of late twentieth century politico-market change as

prudentialism offers, accurately modelling the relationship between prudentialism as a political philosophy and the market institutions which enact its techniques, involves a level of mundane, material detail the governmentality literature seldom provides. The aim in the remainder of this section is to explore this relationship through an historical account of the legislative context surrounding industrial assurance. This involves looking at the ways in which insurance providing institutions collide and coalesce with other actors to create – for want of a better term – an ‘insurance world’. These other actors include market participants, consumers and competitors as well as governmental and legal institutions among others. The key point is that it is the combined practices and interactions of these actors which made (or enacted) not only insurance markets, but also actuarialism as a mode of government and its political variants whether in socialised, privatised or hybrid form.

The diversity of actors involved in developing insurance, and insurance for the poor in particular, is clear even early in the nineteenth century. An 1807 Bill proposing the establishment of a ‘Fund and Assurance office for investing the Savings of the Poor’ demonstrates that the insurance of working men was already recognised as the proper concern of government. While mutual thrift organisations like the friendly societies, which then provided the main means of financial security for the poor, had formed independently of government interference, it was as Frederick Eden noted in 1798, unsurprising, given the strong motive force of saving for burial expenses, ‘that an attempt should have been made to draw ‘thrift’ into a centralized state-controlled institution.’ The Bill proposed the collaboration of the Post Office in the administration of a ‘Poor Assurance Office’ to create a state sponsored scheme for what later became known as ‘industrial assurance’.

The 1807 Bill never became law but it is nonetheless an early example of the governmental problem presented by insurance and poor insurance in particular. There were, by this point, a number of commercial companies providing a range of life insurance products but

they targeted their business primarily at the middle and upper classes who could afford costly, annual or biannual premiums. For the less well-off, the primary means of saving against contingencies was offered by friendly societies and burial clubs. Friendly societies were not explicitly commercial entities; rather they were modelled along fraternal, collective and voluntaristic lines. Burial clubs similarly were not commercial entities but they tended to be much smaller and much less formal than friendly societies. The divide between friendly society and commercial models was a significant one but it would, for a number of reasons, be inaccurate to read within it the antecedents of a socialised versus privatised divide.

Friendly societies may have promulgated a collectivist solution to risk but they were generally selective, conservative and firmly committed to liberal ideals of individual responsibility. They were not ‘of’ the market but neither were they strictly ‘off’ it. They may have had ‘higher and holier ends than mere pecuniary recompense’ as the Manchester Unity Oddfellows⁶ put it, but profit and sustaining a market share became increasingly important drivers as the century progressed even if the societies refused such terminology. Yet they were clearly not commercial companies by another name either. As Weinbren (2006: 323) points out, they were, in legal terms, closer to state bodies and formed part of the ‘reciprocal cycle of taxation and relief’. Equally, while commercial companies proposed an explicitly market-based and profit-seeking solution they shared a commitment to ideals of thrift, prudence, benevolent self-interest and individual responsibility which would not have looked out of place in a friendly society context. As the century progressed the field was further complicated by the entry of new players including new generations of burial clubs, collecting friendly societies and industrial assurance companies as well as nascent governmental schemes.

These players were all subject, at different times and in different ways, to governmental regulation. A vast range of offices offering insurance in some form were established in the first half of the nineteenth century but their high failure rate⁷, a result of poor management,

actuarial incompetence, inadequate accounting and fraudulent practices, fuelled existing convictions that insurance was a matter of governmental concern requiring specific regulation. A series of legislative interventions directed at commercial companies were made in the nineteenth century including the 1844 *Joint Stock Companies Act*,⁸ the 1853 *Select Committee of Inquiry into Assurance Associations*, the 1865 *Government Annuities Act* and the 1870 *Life Assurance Companies Act* while friendly societies were the objects of nineteen Acts of Parliament between 1793 and 1875, five parliamentary committees and the 1871-4 Royal Commission.⁹ Industrial assurance companies were the specific target of the 1896 *Collecting Societies and Industrial Assurance Companies Act*, the 1909 *Assurance Companies Act*, the 1923 *Industrial Assurance Act* and further enactments in 1929 and 1940. In addition the 1911 *National Insurance Act*, the 1920 *Parmoor Report*, the 1933 *Cohen Report* and the 1942 *Beveridge Report* had far reaching consequences for the industry.

The sheer number of legislative interventions directed at insurance organisations is symptomatic of the trouble insurance caused British governments. As has been well documented elsewhere, government committees listened to a range of expert testimony but the problems posed by insurance, technically and actuarially and the diversity of interests it touched upon repeatedly evaded legislative solution even that modestly targeted at improving financial safety and transparency.¹⁰ Even reaching a conceptual consensus on how assets and liabilities were best measured, for instance, proved problematic given that company liabilities could only really be determined through detailed, actuarial valuation. Such valuations were conducted only periodically and by the companies' own actuaries raising reasonable questions about their validity and independence. The recalcitrance of this problem left one witness to the 1841-4 Select Committee to conclude that the 'best security for the public is, that a man is not bound to insure with any particular company; he selects any company he pleases' (in Horton & Macve, 1994: 303). This defence employs a market logic that was repeated throughout the

nineteenth century: if insurance companies could not be effectively regulated by government, individuals acting in a free market would furnish their own safeguards.

Such a defence was never entirely satisfactory even in the context of a Victorian liberal commitment to unregulated markets. Companies - notoriously the Albert and the European in the late 1860s - continued to collapse and while the 1870 *Life Assurance Companies Act* ultimately produced a fairly light touch regulatory framework there was a real political and governmental impulse to treat insurance as a special case. This impulse is at its clearest in regard to assurance products directed at the poor. Friendly societies covered part of this market with an estimated 4-6 million members by the third quarter of the century (Weinbren, 2006). But friendly societies catered mainly for the skilled and better paid members of the working classes making 'no appeal at all to the grey, faceless lower third' (Gilbert, 1966: 166). They were also not without their problems with a high rate of failure and abuses recorded by the government appointed Registrar of Friendly Societies¹¹. Of rapidly increasing significance were the new 'industrial' companies including the Prudential founded in 1848, the Refuge in 1858 and the Pearl in 1864.

In the 1860s the new companies' domination of the field was not quite secure when Gladstone, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, introduced a bill empowering the Postmaster General to transact life assurance. The 1865 Government Annuities Act introduced a state run fully contributory insurance scheme which was designed to offer safer provision, on more advantageous terms, than either the friendly societies or the assurance companies. Under the scheme, premiums towards sums assured between £20 and £100 could be paid direct into a post office. That Gladstone could countenance such a scheme is an indication of the peculiarity of insurance as a limit case. Gladstone was generally a champion of the free market but in his speech outlining the Bill he characterised the regulation of industrial assurance 'as a duty owed by Parliament to the nation' (Wilson and Levy, 1937: 40). The motive forces behind the

Act, like those of subsequent legislation, were undoubtedly mixed featuring both a paternalistic drive to protect the poor from market excesses and a governmentalist, even biopolitical, drive to capitalise on the emerging potential of industrial insurance techniques for fostering thrift, self-reliance and a measure of financial security.

The industrial companies, especially the Prudential, resisted Gladstone's scheme energetically, forcing him to raise the lower ceiling on annual sums assured from £5 to £20 - a move which effectively ring-fenced their control of the lower end of the market¹². The industry's alacrity in responding to the governmental threat was an early indication of how politically nimble it would become. On this occasion it proved unnecessary as the Post Office scheme struggled to establish itself with relatively few people entering and even fewer sustaining payment of their premiums. By 1915 Sidney Webb (later Lord Passfield¹³) diagnosed the scheme a 'complete and colossal failure' but it limped along until 1928. The extent of its failure can best be gauged from its market share. Throughout its history the Post Office scheme issued 29425 contracts; in comparison by 1910 over 30 million policies had been issued by around 75 industrial insurance organisations (Morrah, 1955). As a 1944 Industrial Life Offices pamphlet put it, the Post Office scheme issued fewer contracts in its 60 year history than any one of the main industrial offices issued in one week.

Despite - or because - of this meteoric rise, the provision offered by both friendly societies and industrial companies remained a matter of governmental concern in the last quarter of the century. Acknowledging the limitations of Gladstone's scheme, Northcote's 1871-4 Royal Commission renewed the call for state provision to cover the whole ground occupied by industrial companies. The Commission's recommendations again encountered vigorous opposition from the companies, the societies and a range of other interest groups and were never adopted. The issue was left unresolved and by 1889 a report on the 1875 Friendly

Societies Act concluded that ‘frauds, abuses and mismanagement’ still typified the industrial sector (Wilson and Levy, 1937: 61).

As the new century began the sector continued to feature a diverse range of players. But while the 75 industrial insurance organisations operating in 1910 included an array of local burial clubs, friendly societies, collecting friendly societies as well as limited liability insurance companies, over ninety per cent of the business was transacted by just twelve companies (Gilbert, 1966). Of these, nine were limited companies and three were ‘collecting friendly societies’. These latter were technically registered as friendly societies under the 1896 Friendly Societies Act but they were far more akin in aims, organisation and methods, to the companies than to friendly societies proper. The industry is usually taken to comprise both the companies and these societies, referred to collectively as industrial offices. While the capacity of burial clubs and friendly societies to secure the savings of the poor provoked governmental concern on the grounds of mismanagement, fraud and high failure rates, the industrial offices prompted a rather different set of concerns.

The success of the industrial offices was derived partly from their refinement of an agency system based on weekly, doorstep collection. The system was notoriously expensive to administer with an expense to receipts ratio as high as 50% and enduring problems with commission-driven ‘overselling’ and policy lapses. It was in large part the apparent wastefulness of the collecting agency system that drove Gladstone and a string of subsequent legislators. The expense of the system meant that industrial policies offered worse terms than ‘ordinary’ life assurance to the poorest sections of the community. The manifest inequity of this formed part of Lloyd George’s motivation in the run-up to the 1911 National Insurance Act (NIA). Lloyd George’s original plan, according to Gilbert (1966), had been to promote the voluntaristic friendly society model within the framework of the NIA. That the NIA, in hampering the friendly societies and bolstering the industrial offices, ultimately achieved

almost the opposite is testament to the challenge of legislating to resolve the ‘matters of concern’ that markets raise. Insurance might be imagined as a coherent theoretical solution to social problems but designing a social insurance scheme that could be imposed on a field already populated by a range of political and quasi-political, market, quasi-market and non-market participants - as sustained and serious attempts at nationalization of the industrial offices in the wake of the Beveridge Report also illustrates - has proved an almost intractable problem historically.

There are a range of reasons why the NIA when it was finally passed bore little resemblance to the scheme originally conceived (Wilson and Levy 1937; Gilbert, 1966). Among, the most significant of these was the pressure exerted by interest groups including the friendly societies, the medical profession and the commercial insurance industry. Lloyd George may have seen the extension of the voluntaristic ideals embodied in the friendly society movement as a necessary element of a state scheme but realising this in practice proved another matter as the different interest groups collided in peculiar ways. Despite their centrality to the scheme, the friendly societies resisted state insurance on a number of grounds, while the decentralised and fragmented nature of their movement diluted their negotiating position against the orchestrated response of the industrial offices represented by the ‘Combine’. Further opposition came from the anti-stamp licking campaign ran by middle-class women resistant to the proposal that they affix insurance stamps to the contribution cards of their servants. The campaign received a great deal of press attention with the *Daily Mail* in particular coordinating public opposition and sponsoring the increasing resistance of the medical profession. The ultimate result of this opposition, Gilbert concludes ‘was to force Lloyd George to depend more heavily upon the well-organised opinion moulding machinery of the industrial companies, and so, in the long run, to undermine further the position of the friendly societies’ (1966: 357-8).

This was an extraordinary result given the original aims of the scheme. As I aim to show in the next section, description of the agency system offers some explanation of how it came about by unravelling the ways in which forms of commercial, political and governmental action co-emerge. This section has tried to show, at a general level, how entangled governmental strategies were with market insurance forms. Nineteenth century legislative efforts bear traces of political philosophies like prudentialist and socialised actuarialism but in partial and contradictory ways. The inability of governments to produce a coherently 'privatised' or 'socialised' insurance model is an example of the necessary and inescapable imbrication of politics and markets or, as Fourcade and Healey (2007) have put it, the ways in which markets ARE politics. In the next section the aim is to explore further what this might mean by considering the ongoing role of collecting agents in shaping the *agencement* of industrial assurance.

3. The Agencement of Industrial Assurance

The industrial insurance industry made its money from the improvidence and fecklessness of the British working population. The lower-class housewife who carefully saved pennies in a sugar bowl over the mantelpiece for the weekly call of the funeral benefit collector could not bring herself to carry those pennies a few blocks to the post office savings bank. Still less could she enjoin her husband to become a member of a friendly society. The gigantic industrial insurance industry was in essence a product of the lack of economic self-discipline among the lower levels of the English working class. (Gilbert, 1966: 323)

What was the position of the working classes in the case of sickness before the act came into operation? Just one third and no more had been able to ensure themselves provision for the days of sickness. It is idle to say that the failure of the remaining two-thirds to make a similar provision was due to thriftlessness. Men who are receiving 25s an hour would do well not to lecture the working classes about their improvidence in not making full provision for the future out of their 25s a week. In some cases undoubtedly that charge could be put with a great appearance of justification. Intemperance, improvidence, extravagance, thoughtlessness,

accounted for a portion of these defenceless cases, but for the vast majority of cases it was sheer hard necessity that drove men out of benefit. (Lloyd George, 1913)

While they spring from very different sides of the debate both these comments on working class saving and insuring patterns miss something important about thrift and prudence. A forms of human economic conduct, thrift and prudence need not be understood as fixed, timeless essences; attributes that individuals can either exercise, or not. Rather they can be considered forms of action that take shape in particular conditions and are measured accordingly. This contingent character means that the disposition of thrift is dependent upon particular combinations of material, social, technical and corporeal elements. Thus the preference of poor housewives to hand their pennies to a collecting agent rather than carry them to the post office might be better explained by how well the agent suited her needs, materially, socially, technically etc., than by an inherent fecklessness. Her thrift is thus not wholly 'hers' in as much as it is produced through, and contingent upon, the encounter with the agent and the material constraints of her world. The aim in this section is to show how thinking about industrial assurance agency, pragmatically, as an agencement, elaborates upon the force of these relations to provide a better explanation of how it came to persist through the twentieth century.

Agencement is used here as in Mcfall (2009), and following Callon (2005), as a means of emphasizing the interconnections between agencies and arrangements which have the capacity to 'act'. The idea of agencement helps elaborate on the conception of actors in actor-network theory by emphasising their hybrid character. Actors here are assemblages of human and non-human, textual and material, social and technical elements. Studying market forms like industrial assurance as agencements is about studying how action unfolds as a consequence of how things come together, how they coincide, coalesce and sometimes collide. Literally, agencement is about how insurance things, or even insurance worlds, are done. If agencements

are arrangements endowed with the capacity of acting in different ways depending upon how they are configured, this points not simply to the force of the material and technical form of such arrangements, as critics like Whittle and Spicer (2008) have argued. For them, ANT approaches to markets rely on the idea that objects or artefacts have certain ‘real’ properties that are then used to explain the relative strength or weaknesses of networks or devices. But, as significant as the material is in ANT, this misses the point. Thinking about market forms as agencements is about looking at how the *dynamic configuration* of the elements works to constitute the whole. In the present context that means looking at how the material, corporeal, social and technical elements of industrial assurance collided to produce, or perform, not just its own markets but the governmental context in which it operated.

Key to this is the idea that agencement involves both description and action or both statements and their worlds (cf Callon, 2007b). In this case, the plethora of printed statements, whether critical, political or promotional, about insurance all helped make the world in which it operated. This touches upon what Maurer (2008) calls the problem (or the impossibility) of imagining incommensurable worlds. Paraphrasing Davidson, Maurer describes these as worlds that reorganise the closet itself rather than the things in it: such worlds, as soon as they are imagined, become translatable in our own terms limiting the scope of imagined alternatives. Critical and political responses to insurance in this fashion are inevitably part of the insurance world they refer to. Insurance legislators, whatever insurance solution they imagined, were drawn inexorably back into arranging and re-arranging the things that were already in the closet.

The argument that extant statements and knowledges about insurance, whether critical, technical or promotional, had a part to play in making particular insurance forms succeed or fail employs the logic of performative action. Through what Judith Butler and Michel Callon in this collection (ppp;ppp), clarify as a ‘perlocutionary’ form of performative action, worlds

are discovered or 'put in motion' (Callon, 2007b: 320), through the constant recalibration of knowledges, statements and practices. Over time, political thinking about insurance, governmental enactments and subsequent legislative tinkering, as well as the market practices of insurance offices and other institutions all contributed to the definition of a world in which particular forms of insurance worked. That this 'perlocutionary performance' of commercial life assurance took place across the fields of law and government as well as markets themselves may be unsurprising at a general level, but at a specific level focusing on the dull details shows how insistently and repeatedly the industrial agency model came up against political, governmental and legislative processes. The outcome of these encounters was a world in which industrial office practices, political models, legislative plans and enactments were almost constantly being adjusted, revised and occasionally abandoned. In this regard, the encounters between the collecting agency model and attempts by successive governments to regulate, reform or socialise insurance schemes are particularly revealing.

As described above, throughout the nineteenth century, governments had perceived the potential of insurance as a mechanism for sponsoring working-class thrift and alleviating the burden on the poor rates. By 1900, industrial companies had flourished despite a series of governmental initiatives designed to provide more secure provision for the working classes. Their success cannot be explained by considering the insurance model they offered in abstract, theoretical or rational economic terms. Initially, industrial offices provided burial insurance in the main, responding to the necessity of staging a 'respectable' funeral. This necessity meant that it was not unusual for even the poorest families to 'well nigh starve' in order to devote 5 per cent, or more, of their income to fund premiums because avoiding the disgrace of a pauper's interment was not an inexpensive matter¹⁴. Johnson (1985) estimates the basic cost of an adult funeral between 1870 and 1937 as ranging from 7 to 9 times an unskilled workers weekly earnings, with the flowers, headstones, mourning clothes etc. required for this final and

greatest festival, all additional costs. The personal, cultural and social significance of funerals cannot be underestimated as a driver of demand but this does not explain how industrial assurance came to supply the need.

The answer to this appears to lie within the agency system. Friendly societies, despite considerable governmental support for their collectivist, fraternal and voluntaristic ideals had been ceding ground to the industrial offices from the 1860s onwards. Problems with friendly society management, solvency, and their market narrowing stipulation of membership requirements ranging from income levels to temperance and church attendance, opened up space for industrial offices to hone a business model which combined the actuarialism of commercial offices with the appeal of community and fraternity¹⁵. This was a model that turned upon the employment of agents to sell policies and to *collect* premiums. As described elsewhere, the agents were well adapted - socially, corporeally, materially and technically - to the communities they served¹⁶. Often recruited directly from the communities they sold to, agents were systematically exhorted to 'know their books' (Forrester, 1907) that is, to develop their sensitivity to, the daily rhythms, routines and, notably, the relations of their customers¹⁷. Agents who managed to insure one member of a family established a foothold into insuring others, and through the long term nature of the contract they could follow in births, deaths and marriages, openings for new policies. Their ability to intrude on such intimate turf would have been limited had they not - corporeally and materially - looked and acted the part.

But this very integration into working class households exacerbated the controversy surrounding the agency system. Gladstone's disdain for agents as 'preachers and denominational missionaries, who, animated by the golden vision of 25 per cent on the premiums paid, find their way into every cottage in the country and become eloquent and learned in the praise of the institutions to which they belong' (Hansard, 1864) was grounded in the view that agents could too easily 'oversell' policies that would subsequently lapse resulting

in complete loss of all premiums. This capacity to oversell was rendered even more scandalous because of the nature of the trade. Agents were selling burial insurance to poor families, often through housewives, to fund funerals widely condemned as ruinously expensive and unnecessarily conspicuous spectacles. If selling an emotionally laden product to poor housewives was not bad enough, the legal standing of the policies sold entered still murkier waters.

The Life Assurance Act of 1774, also known as the Gambling Act, required an 'insurable interest' to exist for a life assurance policy to be taken out on the 'life of another'. Insurable interest requires that individuals have a reasonable expectation of pecuniary loss through the death of another person. The 1774 Act further stipulated that the policy sum assured should be no greater than that interest although an unlimited insurable interest was subsequently recognised to exist between husbands and wives. That unlimited insurable interest remains the stuff of the classic murder plot serves as a hint of the moral hazard legislators sought to curtail. If life insurance was not to be an incentive to gambling - or worse - on the lives of others: policyholders had to have a bona fide interest in the continued lives of the assured. This provision was well established in ordinary life assurance in the nineteenth century but was openly disregarded in industrial assurance practice. The reasons for this lay within the small sums involved and a recognition that relatives, who lack insurable interest, may still reasonably claim to incur funeral expenses. By the end of the century, a good proportion of the industrial policies in place were 'life of another' policies effected by a range of relatives. These policies were formally recognised by the Assurance Companies Act, 1909 which allowed insurance for limited sums on the lives of parents, grandparents, grandchildren, and brothers and sisters.

Despite the 1909 Act, insurance upon the 'life of another' continued to be controversial. It was extensively debated in the Parmoor, Cohen and Beveridge reports, the law was revised in

1923 and 1930, yet questions were still being raised in parliament in the 1940s (Hansard, 1944, 1949). The 1909 Act retrospectively legalised policies enacted even by distant relatives where policyholders reasonably thought they would incur funeral expenses. But a number of morally hazardous ambiguities were unresolved by the Act. It was unclear; for instance, whether funeral expenses referred only to the direct costs of burial or to indirect, related expenses like mourning clothes, travel etc. This was of some significance because while multiple relatives may well legitimately incur expenses, there was nothing to prevent ‘over-insurance’ involving multiple policies on frail, aged lives. As a witness to the Cohen committee noted *‘I came across a case where there were policies for a total of £400 effected on one old woman in a workhouse in Wales; they had all got a bit on her. She was probably buried by the parish’* (in Hansard, 1944).

That these policies could be effected without the consent of the life assured made matters worse, but as the persistence of the debate through the Parmoor, Cohen and Beveridge committees suggests, the commerce in ‘life of another’ policies proved extremely resistant to regulation. In simple terms, the conditions the 1909 and subsequent enactments imposed to regularise these policies were largely unenforceable in the context of commercial practice. Documenting the existence of consent and allowable relationships between the policyholder and the life assured was a formidable task. Moreover, since the agents who might be in a position to attempt this also relied for their livelihood on issuing such policies there was an inherent conflict. The obstinacy of this conflict meant that Arthur Molson, the MP for High Peak, could still ask the Chancellor of Exchequer in 1944 why he was *‘conniving at the existence of large numbers of industrial assurance policies, illegal under the Industrial Assurance Acts, 1909 and 1923’* (Hansard).

Agents’ intimate connection to the households they served were, simultaneously, what made industrial assurance so successful and so problematic. Politicians, legislators and

campaigners repeatedly complained of agents' undue influence. Gladstone's 'denominational missionaries' were, for Lloyd George 'an army numbering scores if not hundreds of thousands' of indefatigable, often very intelligent' agents and collectors (in Gilbert, 1966: 328). The problem as Sydney Webb, saw it was,

We do not see how it is possible for an all-pervading army of professional canvassers, paid to enrol the largest number of recruits, on a method of remuneration that makes loss of livelihood the penalty for every failure of persuasiveness, invariably to abstain from a magnification of the advantages and slurring over of the shortcomings and of the cost of a policy which the public absolutely refuse to read, and which is couched in language not as clear as it might be, and certainly incomprehensible by the vast majority of those concerned. (Webb, 1915)

Despite these conflicting interests, agents, as the companies were quick to remind legislators, were widely consulted by their customers and regarded as 'philosophers, guides and friends'. Their influence upon, or at least access to, practically every house in every constituency was trumpeted to the Parmoor, Cohen and Beveridge committees to counter attempts to socialise industrial assurance (Nationalisation Box, PRU). Alongside the systematic lobbying of the Combine, which had been formed in 1901 to carry out 'any lawful thing which shall tend to promote the principles, practice and business of Industrial Assurance and for mutual protection against unfair or prejudicial legislation' (in Gilbert, 1966: 337); fears about the electoral clout of agents are widely understood to have derailed Lloyd George's original plans for the 1911 NIA (Wilson & Levy, 1937, Gilbert, 1966). But it is unlikely that Lloyd George's scheme left the industrial business unscathed simply because he was overwhelmed by the strength of the offices. Rather, by his own admission, he understood little about insurance when he began to draw up the Bill and it was through his encounters with the offices, the friendly societies and other interest groups: through processes of consultation, drafting and modification, that he refined a model of how the insurance world worked. In short, the offices, and the collecting

agency model in particular, arguably proved as significant in the final design of his scheme as the theoretical politics of socialized actuarialism.

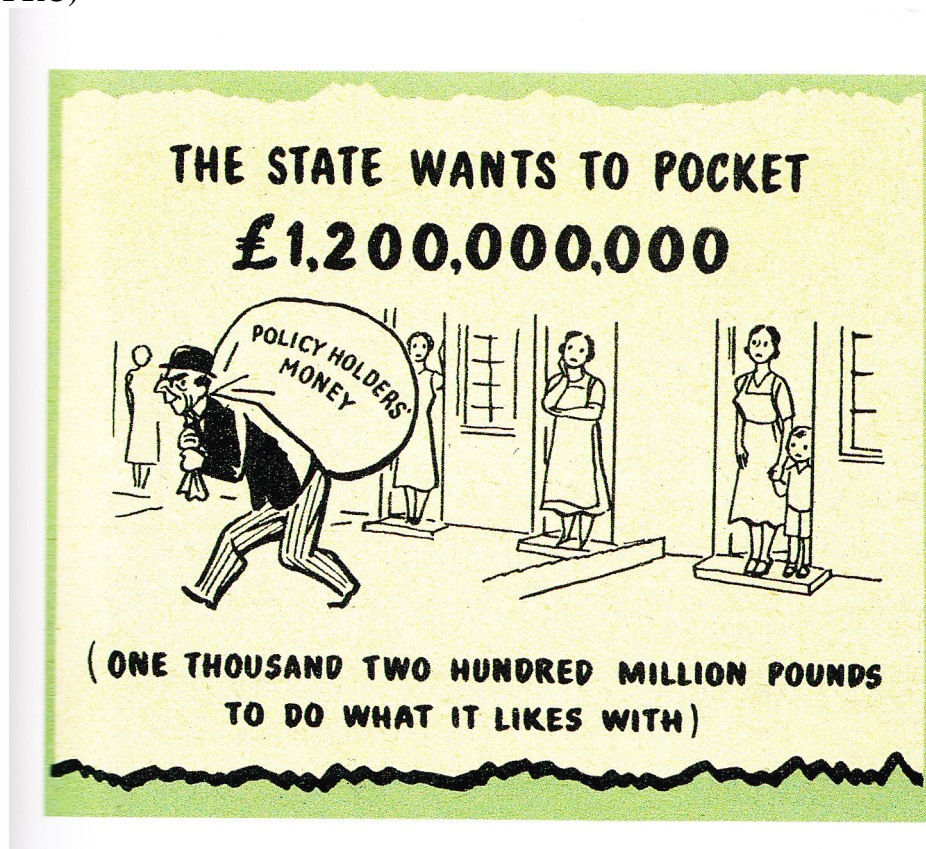
Throughout this period, there were repeated calls to nationalise or re-regulate industrial assurance and the industry, particularly the agency model, was heavily criticised in both the Parmoor and the Cohen committees for the familiar offences of high expense ratios, overselling and policy lapses. Both during and after government committees, the offices engaged in systematic lobbying to both the government and the public. Joseph Burn, the general manager of the Prudential between 1920 and 1941, attended private meetings at the Treasury to discuss the question of nationalisation, gave expert witness to the Cohen committee and participated in an extensively researched BBC broadcast debate with Arnold Wilson MP¹⁸ (Burn, c1934, PRU). Critique centred upon the agency system, but as the offices, by now represented by the Industrial Life Offices Association, repeatedly and with some justification, insisted; legislators did not fully comprehend the business or the necessity of collecting agents. Against the precarious cash economies of working class life, extensive voluntary insurance, to paraphrase Lloyd George; ‘cannot get done’, without collection¹⁹. The expense of collection, the offices maintained, was something customers understood and were willing to pay for (cf Industrial Life Offices, 1944). In his preparation for the BBC debate, Joseph Burns recounted the tale of a man who held four endowment policies which were about to mature for a total sum assured of £400;

an official from my head office asked him why on earth he had not paid his premiums annually instead of weekly, as by doing so he would have secured much better terms. The policyholder was very angry with my representative and very much resented his advice. He said he knew it was a more expensive way of saving, but that he regarded our agent who had collected his premiums as the best friend he had ever had, because in 3 or 4 years he would have £200, which he never would have but for the weekly efforts of the agent to collect the premium. I should much have preferred that, that man had taken a policy by annual premium but can you or I say

that the man had not acted in his own best interests? He knew that if he tried to save that £200 by the cheapest means he would never have saved it at all. (Burns, c.1934, PRU)

The offices' defence was scarcely disinterested but it raised awkward questions about regulators' assumptions that industrial assurance customers were not equipped to act in their own best interests. The Beveridge report acknowledged the contribution 'knowledgeable, hard-working' (1942: 172) agents had made to the encouragement of thrift but refused to accept the necessity of the agency system or the idea that consumers knowingly paid extra for the element of compulsion contained within it. Industrial assurance, the report recommended, should be dismantled in favour of a statutory monopoly which would endeavour to substitute direct payment of premiums for collection.

Figure 1 Industrial Life Offices Association, 'Your Insurances are your Business' Anti-nationalisation leaflet
(Source: PRU)



In 1948 the Labour Party manifesto, *Labour Believes in Britain*, formalised plans to nationalise the industry. The industry responded with a vast counter campaign; a point-by-point reply was sent to MPs and to office staff, leaflets were published, writers were commissioned to produce articles for periodicals including *The Sunday Times* and *Soundings* and the British Insurance Association took space in 60 newspapers to publicise the case (Nationalisation Box, PRU; Dennett, 1998). The bestselling Beveridge Report had provoked greater public concern about socialised insurance and nationalisation than might be imagined today. Agents were directly implicated in the campaign. They were explicitly recruited and encouraged by the Industrial Life Offices Association to use their influence to ‘talk on the doorstep’ to bolster policyholders opposition. The strength of this opposition probably persuaded the Labour party against emphasising the nationalisation plan in their 1949-50 election campaign but whatever the proximate causes Labour was ultimately elected with a majority too reduced to carry the plan to fruition.

By such means the collecting agency device helped the companies to shape a market, a legislative context and a world, in which their insurance model could succeed. Collecting industrial branch insurance survived a further attempt at nationalisation in the 1970s to remain substantially intact until the 1980s when ironically, it was neo-liberal legislation in the form the 1986 Financial Services Act, which finally killed it off. The argument here is that the dynamic articulation between these different elements: the collecting agency model, the lobbying of the offices, the legislative framework and the political statements, rhetoric and even critique that responded to it, which came together to create a world in which industrial assurance prospered.

4. Concluding comments: pragmatics, politics and history

This paper has suggested that pragmatic description offers the best account of how particular markets emerge. This is not simply a matter of unravelling the technical features of markets. Rather through the model of agencement the emphasis is on examining how the material, social, technical and corporeal elements of markets collide to create unpredictable consequences. The emphasis on movement is important. Agencement calls attention to the ways in which the continual, ongoing configuration of elements performs markets for a time. In the case of industrial assurance this perlocutionary performance clearly works at the level of markets *and* politics. The history of collecting agency shows how political and legislative responses to insurance co-emerged alongside market forms. Friendly societies, burial clubs and industrial offices were the ‘things in the closet’ that government legislators seemed bound to rearrange irrespective of the alternative insurance solutions they imagined. That there was a world of difference between imagined political insurance models, whether socialised or privatised, government legislation and poor or industrial insurance practice is quite clear from this history. Less clear is what this reveals about the relationship between pragmatics, politics and history and this is worth considering in a little more detail.

One feature of descriptive, pragmatic histories is that they offer more nuanced, more measured accounts of the relationship between markets and politics. In the case of insurance, the modelling of socialised versus privatised actuarial schemes captures key differences in the way insurance has been imagined politically. But these are models in the true sense that they capture some critical elements but leave much of the detail and much of the mess out of the picture. As Liukko (2008) has argued, however powerful the political opposition of socialised versus privatised schemes is, in practice, all insurance schemes mix the principles of collectivism and individual responsibility to greater and lesser degrees. Looking closely at how different insurance providing organisations have functioned historically also unsettles ‘easy’ political oppositions in which private market based schemes are characterised as the ‘bad’

against socialised state schemes as the ‘good’. What should be said, politically, of friendly societies in their promotion of voluntary fraternal cooperation and individual responsibility? What of their normative standards of selectivity, parochialism and poor financial management? Similarly what should be said of the profit margins and high expense ratios of industrial branch companies? What of the fact that despite its manifest deficiencies the unique agencement of collecting agency made industrial branch the most successful means of generating savings among the lowest income groups?²⁰

These sorts of questions emerge very clearly in pragmatic, ANT informed, accounts and they are clearly political questions. Collecting industrial branch can be considered a “faire laissez-faire” device (Cochoy, 2008), or a device that made private working class insurance workable and this is of political consequence. Such findings are nevertheless unlikely to satisfy those who see apolitical banality in ANT. For critics like Fine (2003, 2004) the problem is not really that ANT lacks politics but that it lacks the right sort of politics, that is, it lacks a general, political economy. Similarly for Whittle and Spicer (2008: 622-23) ANT ‘degrades the meaning of political action by elevating the status of non-human actors’ and has a tendency to ‘legitimize hegemonic power relations, ignore relations of oppression and sidestep any normative assessment of existing organisational forms’. What these critics are looking for is an emancipatory politics that can tackle questions of economic justice, poverty and oppression. The intractable problem with this is that such questions are always easier to tackle in the abstract than they are to resolve in practice. Pragmatic accounts of markets leave little room for doubt that markets *are* inherently political or, as Fourcade and Healey (2007: 299-300) have it ‘explicitly moral’ and ‘saturated with normativity’. Recognising the moral, cultural and political character of markets and the necessary politics within pragmatic description however is not the same as offering a critical evaluation of them and their effects. Without such an evaluation, pragmatic description won’t satisfy all critics but the case here is that market

description has a politics and scope for effective engagement. To labour the metaphor, trying to rearrange things according to any principle is far more likely to be successful if you at least know something about what's in the closet. This kind of information tends to call into question calls for academic research to be radical or emancipatory because it shows up how difficult a task it is to intentionally reprogram worlds according to 'fairer' principles. What insurance legislators repeatedly came up against was that 'fairness' 'economic justice' and 'thrift' were not matters over which there was widespread agreement among the various interest groups. This disagreement, this sidedness, as pragmatist philosophers remind us, carries its own risks, its own costs and it is these that pragmatic approaches are an attempt to manage (cf Menand, 2001).

Pragmatic accounts, as Callon (2007a) suggests are very good at exposing how markets trigger 'matters of concern' that can evolve into political issues that markets themselves can seldom resolve. Market agencements, as he proposes, do seem to provoke matters of concern that coincide with the emergence and constitution of concerned groups. These processes are intrinsic to the nineteenth century insurance markets described here. This begs the final question of how useful it is, in the absence of many historical accounts, that so much of the market performativity literature is concerned with questions of contemporary proliferation. It may be correct to argue, as Callon (2007a) does, that innovation and the rapid transformation of technical and scientific objects creates a proliferation of the social and the political 'matters of concern' markets prompt. But to make such a historical claim requires more history than you currently find in ANT accounts of markets.

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¹ In the UK the term life 'assurance' as opposed to 'insurance' is generally used to refer to commercial life insurance projects. The technical distinction Grey (1992) highlights between assurance which refers to an event that *will* happen, ie death, in contrast to insurance against an event which *may* happen ie fire; is useful but academic in the face of the interchangeable use of the terms both within and outwith the industry.

² For more on the argument that ANT approaches offer selective, banal descriptions which lack political engagement or explanatory power see in particular Fine (2003, 2004), Whittle and Spicer (2008) and Miller (2002, 2005).

³ See the debate between de Vries (2007), Marres (2007) and Latour (2007) on questions of sub politics and issue-oriented politics as well as Menand's (2002) account of the historical development of pragmatism.

⁴ The term 'industrial' life assurance is probably something of an accident. The Prudential used the term initially to describe their target market amongst those 'industrious' middle and upper working classes.

⁵ See also McFall (2009, 2010) for more detailed accounts of the sympathies as well as the tensions between governmentality and ANT inflected approaches.

⁶ *Oddfellows Magazine*, April, 1844 cited in Weinbren (2006).

⁷ Figures referred to by Gladstone in the first committee debating his Government Annuities Bill and published in the *Manchester Guardian*, 11 March 1864, have between 1844-1862, number of companies projected 596, founded 276, ceased to exist 259, amalgamations and transfers of business, 173, wound up in Chancery 57.

⁸ As Horton and Macve (1994) suggest there are good reasons for regarding this Act as an insurance companies Act that includes other forms of business for convenience.

⁹ See Hacking 1990, Horton and Macve 1994, Porter, 1996; Wilson & Levy, 1937; Morrah, 1995 for more on parliamentary legislation on insurance companies; Corderey, 2003 and Weinbren, 2006 offer more on friendly societies

¹⁰ See eg Hacking (1990), Horton and Macve (1994) and Porter (1996)

¹¹ Tid Pratt, the Registrar of Friendly Societies recorded in 1867, 13935 collapses out of 38351 Friendly Societies founded between 1793 and 1867 (Wilson & Levy, 1937).

¹² According to 1874 Northcote commission, see Johnson (1985 34-6).

¹³ Webb's report on Industrial Assurance published as a supplement to the *New Statesman* is widely known as the Passfield Report.

¹⁴ In Wilson and Levy, 1937; p133, Booth's 1882 survey has even the poorest families putting away 3 ½ d. per week (see Gilbert, 1966) while Rowntree's 1936 survey of 267 families living below the poverty line shows between 5-20% of income spent on life insurance (See Johnson, 1985: p45).

¹⁵ See also Alborn (2001).

¹⁶ McFall (2009) offers more detail on agents' activities but the area remains under-researched.

¹⁷ This is clear in the insurance press, handbooks and in the agents supervision systems in place in companies like the Prudential and the Pearl. See Dennett (1998); Pearl (1990); 'A fieldman' (c.1935); Forrester (1907)

¹⁸ This is Arnold Wilson of Wilson and Levy (1937) which remains the most detailed critical studies of the industry

¹⁹ Introducing the National Insurance Bill in the Commons, Lloyd George said 'you cannot get the working classes voluntarily to insure without collection, whatever the benefit You cannot get it done' (in Morrah, 1955)

²⁰ See Burton et al.'s (2005) discussion of the decline of industrial branch and the subsequent failure to develop adequate alternative means of promoting savings among lower socio-economic groups.

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